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1814

AN
ORATION,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

WASHINGTON BENEVOLENT SOCIETY

AT CAMBRIDGE.

JULY 4, 1814.

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BY RICHARD H. DANA, Esq.
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At a meeting of the Standing Committee of the Washington Benevolent Society at Cambridge :

Voted—That Messrs. PROCTOR PEIRCE, ELIAB W. METCALF, and JOHN TROWBRIDGE, be a committee to wait on RICHARD H. DANA, Esq. to express the thanks of the Society for his patriotic Oration, delivered before them, and to request a copy thereof for the press.

Attest, WILLIAM HILLIARD, *Secr'y.*

ORATION.

THE day which we have met to celebrate, we once vainly imagined, was to work an universal change in the condition and character of man; that it was to spread its light over the nations which we supposed were sitting in the gloom of slavery, ignorance and crime; and that they were to come forth the renovated beings of freedom, wisdom and virtue. In vision, the very face of nature was changing; every weak thing was waxing strong, and every dry thing green. The world, with its swamps and deserts, was shooting forth in all the beauty and freshness of Eden; and man walking in the midst, sinless and free as Adam. But, alas! all that our fevered imaginations pictured out was but a dream. The physical and moral world have undergone no change—notwithstanding the American Revolution, Arabia still has its deserts, and mankind their sins. Human nature has not yet reached that stage of perfectibility in which laws are but useless entanglements, and the power of government but a cumbersome restraint upon virtue. Cunning and violence are not yet eradicated; the simple are still defrauded, and the weak oppressed; the prodigal is neighbour to the frugal, the idle to the industrious, the factious to the peaceable.

The rise, the progress, and would I could say the fall of this doctrine of equality, perfectibility, and absolute liberty in man, is well worthy a few moments consideration. The untimely check it has put upon the improvements and growing power of this new country—its fatal connexion with a like system in Europe; and the tremendous force with which, so far as it extended, it swept away all that was worthy the pride of the old world, give the subject a strong, though melancholy interest, in the heart of every man whose understanding it has not bewildered; or whose goodness it has not corrupted.

This vagary of the brain, that the virtue of man was such as to render political restraint, almost or wholly useless—that his errors and his crimes were attributable to the oppression of old established governments—that fixed government and tyranny were the same—that distinctions in honors, wealth and rank were alike an insult to the understanding, and an unauthorized assumption over the person of man—that the sceptre should be broken in pieces, the ribbon torn from the breast, and the very land marks of property trodden down, began to be inculcated at the close of our revolutionary war—a war imbittered by the remembrance of ill repaid loyalty, and fond connexions rudely torn asunder—a war which aroused every feeling of offended pride, and put a keen edge on the resentment which will stir within the bosom of every high-minded man, when scoffed at and insulted. Not a war in which armies are sent abroad, while the majority of the nation lose the remembrance of it in the occupation of business, or pursuits of pleasure; but a war which

kept the spirits in alarm with the gleam of distant fires, and stories of approaching desolation—a war which broke in upon family repose, and carried its terrors and death to our peaceful firesides. This scene of confusion, of horrors and gloom at last began to break away. The heavy clouds which had hung over us, black as night, were moving to distant regions. The shout of triumph and joy of a whole nation ascended as the bright sun of our Independence burst out upon them.

Do but consider what a varied mass of folly, as well as wisdom, of vice as well as virtue, this state of things was quickening into an untried and violent action. It sent its warming influence through the land, and the rank weeds shot up, luxuriant and towering as the oak. The common business of life was broken in upon—every man became a politician—the plough was left in the furrow, the work shop was shut, and the spider spun his web undisturbed over the books of the scholar. Ignorance, with her simple system of wide spreading destruction, was preparing to move forward on her labours; and Learning, vain of her acquirements, and most confident, where most inexperienced; with her brain bewildered with ill arranged conceits, was hastening after, ready to deck the homeliness of this working-day world in all the ornaments of her own fantastic imagination. The rose was to spread its leaves where the sea-weed swings to the tide of ocean—the orange was to ripen at the poles; and palaces of ice were to brighten in the sun of the tropics. The learned theorist was looking forward, with complacent expectancy, to the momentous period when the work of gigantic destruction should

commence ; when the proud and stable fabrics of European constitutions, sacred with the hoar of ages, revered as the defences of nations, beloved as the guardians of the good ; under whose sheltering dominion the literature, the science, the arts, the multiplied and various improvements, the charities and quiet of domestic life, and the religion of our Saviour, which threw a charm over all, had grown up and flourished, when these fabrics should be crumbled into dust, and all they had fostered and protected, should be laid bare and shivering to the elements. The mighty eruption of the political world, sweeping in its headlong descent, the land-marks of property, the humble home, the palace, the castle and the very temple of our God ; was gazed upon with a serenity as great as is the silent lapse of waters, spreading health, and freshness, and beauty in their course. Vain of their own mad systems, they heeded not the pain, the poverty, and heavy sorrows which awaited the human race. The dissolution of governments, dear to a people, as well from their intrinsic merit, as from long rooted prejudices, was looked upon with the curious, unmoved intentness of the chemist in an analyzing process ; and the theorists of the time, thought only upon the proud moment when their grand experiment should begin. In anticipation, they set about clearing away the holy ground, loaded with the mighty fragments. The people who lingered amidst the ruins, dear to them from the recollection of all the comforts and blessings they had enjoyed beneath the edifice, when it stood entire and towering in its strength, were driven aside by these vain and bustling projectors, to

make way for the fragile structures of their own feeble hands, tricked out in all the finery and smartness of their tasteless carving and gilding.

Happily for our country, notions so absurd, hopes so delusive, and desires so criminal, did not attain to their full growth, vigor and popularity, in the early and critical period of the old confederation. They were the darling offspring of a set of men, of whom the world then knew little, and cared less. Though their countenances had an incongruous expression of distraction, idiocy, cunning, malignity and ferocity; yet so clumsily were they put together, with such an unmanageable cumbersomeness of limb, such a ludicrous disproportion of the whole bloated frame, that every one who looked upon them thought that such sickly deformities would soon be thrown out, an offensive mass before the common sun. But, alas, how short-sighted is man! These bantlings, nourished and dandled by their sires, soon expanded to an unwieldy bulk. In an unlucky moment they attracted the observation, and by a strange fatuity of taste and judgment, they speedily grew into the favor and adoption of a certain great man, who has an instinctive yearning for every thing prodigious—a man who has cared and thought more about the mammoth, than about a fellow-being; for the very philosophical reason that he is a great deal the bigger of the two. Half ashamed of this unaccountable attachment, and unable to subdue it, because unused to self control, he set about the daring project of making them as fascinating to others, as they were to himself. Busy as a milliner, he began decking out their diseased and livid nakedness, in all the

finery of diamonds and ribbons ; and in raptures at his success, he brought them forward in either hand, the objects of disgust to every delicate eye, to attract the stupid gaze of the ignorant, and awaken the unhallowed joy of the wicked.

But it was not the labour of a single day which could allure men from long established principles, to those novel in their kind ; though formed to flatter the vanity, confirm the pride, and excite and indulge the licentious passions of our nature. But the season fruitful in projects was approaching. A new constitution was to be formed ; and the opinion of the wisest, that an alteration in our ill-jointed government was necessary, gave an indirect sanction to schemes, however undigested in their parts, or faulty in their groundwork. The mighty labour of throwing off an old and powerful government, under which we had lived from our political birth, was just accomplished. With spirits elevated to intoxication at our new born freedom, with hearts confident from success, we were called to the solemn work of self-government.

How vain and transitory the thought, that when the storm of war had passed over us, we should sit in the still sunshine of our homes, that our labours would be finished, and the Sabbath of rest come ! The mightiest of human efforts was before us. How lightly did we esteem its importance ! How ignorant were we of its difficulties ! The structure of a constitution which should govern by one set of general rules, beings as diversified in their characters as their faces, and with pursuits as various as both, which should put the poor man beyond the haughty dominion

of the wealthy, and guard the acquisitions of the rich, against the avarice and vulgar envy of the low, which should direct the energies of the country, to protect it from foreign violence, and internal discord, yet leave the liberties of the individual secure; which, in fine, should prevent man from returning to the ignorance and barbarity of a savage, hold him from the wilds of the forest, expand his mind, cultivate his taste, awaken the kinder feelings of the heart, make him the creature of the refined, social state, spreading blessings about him only to be blessed again—and all this to be so framed, as to withstand the insidious attempts of those who should be called to guard it, and the assaults of those panting for rule; a structure too, resting not on the virtues alone, but on the exact balance of our very vices, for its duration; the high pride of the great, set in opposition to the levelling system of the poor; the selfish calculating calmness of the avaricious, to the impetuosity of the rash and ambitious. Such was the work to be accomplished, so intricate in its parts, so momentous in its completion, to millions of the human race!

We have called ourselves the wisest, and freest of people. The thoughtless presumption with which the most ignorant preached lectures on governments, declaimed against all under which the world had so long lived, and gravely proposed legislating for the whole human race, might induce others to call us the vainest of people. Constitution-mongers came forth, thick and clamorous as reptiles after a rain. It was a time when every man felt the safety of a whole people resting on the labours of his own mighty mind. At

the corner of every street, plans of government were brought forward, and discussed, with all the vehemence that pride of opinion could give them, and with an earnestness as great, as if the failure of their adoption would lay prostrate the power and glory of the nation.

This vanity was as harmless in its nature, as it was amusing. But there was cause for gloomy apprehension, when there were found amongst the leading statesmen of our country, men cursed with that paltry ambition, which would raise itself to power upon the vices, the follies, and prejudices of the bad and the ignorant; who, not endowed with that elevation of mind which prides itself in moral greatness, could oppose the labors of those heroes who were struggling to save a nation from itself; to give it a government which should strengthen its weakness, subdue its prejudices, confirm its wavering, and raise it to renown and power amongst the nations of the earth. There was good cause for dread, when such men, cold and selfish of heart, went forth to preach to a people made vain by success, with ears greedy for praise, with hearts filled with hate towards the constitution and character of a great, free and moral nation; to preach to them the doctrine, that liberty was in danger from the usurpation of rulers, not from the excesses of the multitude; that laws were to subjugate the honest poor, not to curb the wealthy and proud; that accumulation of property was an assumption of what nature intended in common for man; that the exactions of justice were an outrage upon human nature; and the formalities of her courts, but the mockery and refinement of oppression; that those we had

been wont to call the friends of sober, chastised liberty, and well braced government, were the supporters of tyrants, and friends of monarchy; and, that under a state of absolute, unadulterated freedom, man would surely attain to the perfection of human nature. With this system, which gave the lie to every man's conscience, which would turn his unbiassed observation from the mingled state of good and ill in life, to gaze with bewildering enthusiasm upon the gaudy, hollow, fleeting show of liberty, equality, and perfectibility, which these political magicians were playing before their eyes—with this system, which would mingle in one indiscriminate mass, the opposite qualities of vice and virtue, which would wrap about the leprosy of falsehood with the garments of truth, and taint their purity with its contagious loathsomeness, did they attempt to allure the better part of society to the worship of the profane deities they had set up. This doctrine, rotten at its heart, and in all its members, was spread through the country, that its authors might be elevated to the rule of the nation which they had deluded and disgraced.

Fortunately for our country, those who led the people through the troubles of the revolution, as yet retained the love and confidence they had so hardly won. Through their labour and influence the broad foundation of our constitution was laid, and the fabrick rose in its fair proportions, the beauty and defence of the nation. When they had entered it, and looked over the land; the ruins of the war yet stood out distinct in the prospect. On our western frontier, its desolating course was marked with all the multiplied horrors

with which savage ferocity could crowd the scene. When the means were sought to repair the waste of the war which had passed over us, and to repel that which still threatened us, it was found that while a heavy debt weighed down the nation, its credit was gone.

The attempts of the Federal party to remove these evils, to adjust all disputes with foreign powers, to raise the country from poverty, and the decay of character, to opulence and dignity, were assailed with all the vulgar abuse of the low, and malignant persecution of the high. The antipathies and jealousies of the people were alarmed; they were told that our leaders were following the downward course of the old tottering governments of Europe; President Washington was accused of aping the monarch, of introducing the absurd and corrupting forms of courts, into the midst of plain, pure republicanism. His ministers were branded aristocrats, and in the poor Secretary of the treasury and his wife, jolted and squeezed in a lumbering stage coach, on their way to the seat of government, were seen the future Lord and Lady Hamilton. Men starving in the service of the public, were gravely charged with attempting to adorn their beggary with the insignia of office, and coats-of-arms of nobility. The petty army raised for the border war, was viewed with suspicion, as the instrument of their extravagant ambition; the assumption of the debt, as attaching the aristocracy of wealth to the government; and the navy, as a useless show, oppressing the honest yeomanry, whilst it administered to the vanity of their leaders.

Whilst the administration, heedless of these clamors, pursued with undeviating firmness the plans they had laid out for the good of their country, the Spirit of Faction, malignant from disappointment, was abroad in the land. He looked over the soil where once stood the forest, cold, gloomy and desolate ; how changed was the scene ! The corn waved in the valley ; the grass was on the sunny hill. He turned, baffled in his evil hopes, from this spot of quiet industry and joy ; but on every side he beheld beauties which moved his hate. Cities sent forth the sounds of labor and gaiety—he saw them the abodes of polished life, domestic comforts, and exalted virtues. Sick of a prosperity, not the product of his own wild schemes, he sent his eye over the ocean, thinking there to dwell with a feeling of strange delight on the solitude of nature ; but even there, the enterprise and industry of man met his view. The sail was spread to the winds, and voices were heard coming over the waters. As he stood on the shore, loathing a scene so full of life and joy, the shouts of Kindred Spirits in a distant clime broke upon his ear. He raised his drooping head—his shrunken form expanded—his eye beamed full and bright ; for he felt that the time was drawing nigh, when those who had spread here the goodly prospect before him, would fall, the victims of his wiles—when this nation would soon be his—a nation which *they* had raised to wealth, to power and to glory.

The doctrine which gleamed faint and dubious over this country, broke hot and blasting upon the kingdom of France, and every green thing lay curled and withered in its scorching light.

The Revolution had commenced—not a revolution in which one king is deposed, and another exalted—not one in which the form of government, alone is changed; but one, having for its object the total subversion of the moral principles of man, and the long established order of the social state. All distinctions necessary to the quiet of society, were to be done away—the links in private life broken asunder. The father was to forego all peculiar fondness for the child, for the false, affected feeling of a general love of the species. All filial reverence and awe were to be eradicated from the heart, as a principle destructive of the grand doctrine of equality and freedom in man. The deep toned feelings were to be stilled; the gentle affections, which had twined themselves about the heart, and quickened and softened it with their balmy influences, were to be rudely torn off; and it was to be left to chill and harden in its loneliness. Old governments were to be overturned; those long rooted prejudices which strengthen a constitution, not by compulsive laws, but by fast and wonted attachments, were to be broken up; an universal democracy was to enlighten an abject and gloomy world with its blissful reign, and man, and woman too, were to be held together by the only bond worthy of improved reason, the great and general bond of philanthropy.

Though this doctrine was written in blood, its ministers marked by a brutal ferocity from which the good man recoiled, and by a vulgar insolence which the proud man could not brook, yet it found in this country, distinguished for sober understanding, general information, and humanity,

its blindest and warmest supporters. Yes, it was this revolution which awakened to redoubled vigor of action the leading opponents of the Washington administration—which gave them for blind and zealous followers all those characters hanging loose on society—all the restless, unprincipled, and ambitious, and many honest of heart, but of wild and heated imaginations.

Notwithstanding the strength of this opposition to his general administration, and the frenzied hostility to his impartial, neutral conduct toward the powers of Europe—notwithstanding the cry that we were bound in honour and gratitude to put on our armour in this holy war of the Great Republic against the despots of Europe; such was the old and deep affection—such the self-subduing awe which the people felt for Washington, that the leaders of the opposition, found it well to preserve the show of respect for the man they hated and envied. This respect was, indeed, but outward. While they trembled under “the solemn aspect, and the high born eye,” which made vice and hypocrisy feel their littleness; under the cover of the press, and in their self-constituted fraternities, their hatred of the man and of the course he pursued, was vented in the grossest falsehoods and lowest abuse.

The melancholy truth was now fully developed, that the visionary schemes, so early projected in our country, were fast growing into favor; and the hope that the sober blessings of our constitution would put such dreams to flight, fell to the ground. It was evident that the French revolution had invigorated and multiplied our theorists and their disciples—that it was corrupting the

morals, and weakening the religious sense of the people; and that, should its doctrine be generally diffused, while they were thus enthusiastic in its cause, it would infect them with all its cruelty, and darken the country with all its horrors. Nothing but the influence which Washington still had over the people, staid them from laying violent hands on the constitution. That influence continued till the effervescence of the French revolution had subsided, and left a party of the intelligent and thoughtful, with power to hold in check the violent and unprincipled.

In vain shall we turn over the records of ancient times, to read the story of such a Man. In vain shall we send the eye abroad, for where now lives, and moves, a Washington? Europe is full of giant minds, but in what individual can we find a *combination* of his greatness and virtues? He was the sublimest image of moral greatness, that the world ever looked upon. In his presence, common men felt awed, and seemed to breath a holier atmosphere. His firm, expansive mind looked over the country fretted and tossed by the petty and angry passions of men; but his heart was calm and sinless. Amidst the flattery and threats, the wiles and violence that surrounded him, he stood

“ Unshaken, unseduced, unterrified.

Nor number, nor example with him wrought

To swerve from truth, or change his constant mind.”

With a frame stiffened with age and the toils of war, and a mind worn with anxiety, and a heart made sad with the follies of his country; he at last withdrew to that spot of quiet and domestic joys on which his eye had ever reposed, beaming with kind emotions and fond remembrances. From

its shades, he looked out upon the world ; but the crimes which were fast crowding, and the heavy sufferings that awaited it, overshadowed the sunshine of his breast, and filled his prophetic soul with images of gloom. But the kind Parent of us all, closed the eyes of the good man in death, and laid him asleep in the stillness of the tomb, with his Fathers. The voice of violence awakes not the dead ! The tumult of war breaks not in on the silence of the grave !

At his death there seemed a pause in nature. Every one who loved and honored him, can remember with what a solemn, thrilling feeling the story of the death of the Father of his country, moved him when it was told.

Where stands the monument of a nation's gratitude to its Protector ? Where shall the stranger read the tale of his mighty deeds ? Does the morning sun gild its top with his brightness ? Does he shed his softer light over it at his going down ? No marble speaks of his works. Envy forbade it. The fear that the people should remember his virtues—that the story of his life should teach a lesson to after times ; has left no stone to cover a nation's Glory. Amidst the shades of his once happy home, is his humble grave ; but the God of nature has scattered his beauties around it ; he has clothed it in green, and watered it with his own dews from heaven.

We must turn from this solemn scene, to the world again—to a world, how changed ! He who had kept the bad in awe, and checked the follies of the presumptuous, was no longer in the midst of us. The period had come to put in practice the systems of our wildest theorists, our most ar-

dent lovers of French liberty and French revolutions.

I was about going over a short history of these authors of fair professions, but of evil works ; directing your attention to the effects of all their labours—the shame, the hardships, the declining virtue of this once proud and happy people—their honesty, impaired by a long course of exaction—exaction, enforced by laws subversive of their liberties—I was about shewing you, your sons and daughters taken from the wholesome labours of the field, and kindly domestic cares ; to draw out heartless, joyless lives, in the corrupting crowd of a Factory—I was about turning your observation to a war of defeat and barbarity on our inland borders—and then asking you to look back, to the once busy, enlivening scenery along the shores of our ocean—then, to ponder with me in sadness over cities, tenantless and grass-grown—to call to mind the noise, the crowd, the hurry, which once filled them—and then walk their deserted streets, where the sound of the footstep strikes distinctly on the ear ; while we seem in the midst of the sepulchres of a nation passed away—the tombs of departed thousands about us. I had intended, further, to have unfolded the influence which France, under all her changes of government, has exercised over this people and its rulers—to have traced to this influence the calamities which have befallen us—to have told you of the ruin with which the world was threatened by her lawless, aspiring and wasteful tyrant. But the time is far spent, and I would not exhaust your wearied spirits with a scene so dreary and com-

fortless, nor shut out from your tired vision that light which first shone pale and flickering in the North; but which has risen, and spread, and awakened nations from torpor and darkness. Let us rejoice, for the chains of captive nations are broken asunder, and millions are returning home from bondage! Let us be glad, for *Peace* has visited them!

But to every moral, and religious man, there is a deeper joy, even than this. After all the sufferings of human nature under the matchless cruelties and horrors of the French revolution, what nation will hasten to break up long established orders, and forms of government, and set the weakness and vices of our nature, free from control? Licentiousness will no longer be called liberty; nor well-balanced liberty, slavery. The immorality and atheism of the turbulent revolution, and of the settled despotism following it, will no longer corrupt the hearts, and bewilder the brains of men. Their effects upon the nation who taught them, and upon the world, will be read by after ages, and remembered with the multitude of their other extravagances and crimes, only to be hated and avoided. Old fashioned principles which some of the *learned* had put away through a love of novelty, or of an exercise of their ingenuity, or above all, the pride of leading a new school—principles which the half-informed sneered at to shew their independence of mind—these, long neglected and despised, will return with all the attractions of freshness and newness, to govern the conduct, and bless the lives of men.

It has often been the case, that doctrines erro-

neous in themselves, have gained the attachment of the world from something amiable and interesting in their teachers—Not so with the teachers of the French revolution—There was no alluring splendor in their crimes, no amiable weakness in their follies—every thing in, and about them, was perverted—their pride was insolence—their courage, ferocity—their patriotism, vanity. They are remembered only as a terror, and an offence to nations. Thanks to a merciful Providence, their course is run! All they passed over lies bare as the desert, and broken with the graves of millions. But the last of their race is ended. He was crushed in the ruins of the throne he had set up. Did a people mourn over him who had led them to glory? Was a city hung in black for him who had filled it with the spoils of nations? No, when he fell from power, the curses of his own, were heavy on him. Did he who had overturned thrones from their deep foundations—who lighted the twilight of the North with the blaze of cities, and made its frozen regions shake with his thunders—did he die from home, and in battle? He left his shattered forces to perish, and returned, beaten and a fugitive, to a falling kingdom. But an avenging power pursued him in his flight. Europe with her Monarchs moved on to his destruction; nor staid till it was done. Did he perish by the sword? He lives—this man, mighty in war, this terror of the human race, lives, the object of a mercy he had never felt, the abject pensioner of the king he wronged. Had he fallen in the conflict; or had severe justice cut him off; sympathy for his death, might have magnified the

energies of his evil mind, and gilded over the foul corruption of his heart. It is better he should live ; for now, the *Hero*, is no more. The Diadem this royal thief had stolen, is wrested from him—the imperial robes in which he wrapped about his vanity, are stripped off—the spear and shield, loosened from his grasp ; and he who was, yesterday, the terror of the world, stands, to day, its mockery and contempt. With his vain pomp and power, have vanished the brilliant pageants which shrunk from the touch of sober reality—Unrestrained liberty, equality, and perfectibility, which floated in gorgeous dyes and fantastic forms before the eye of the visionary, have faded away, like the clouds which hang over the setting sun. Gone, too, is that despotism which silenced the voice of gladness—veiled the cheerful face in sorrow—chilled every warm and virtuous feeling of the heart, and weighed it down with present sufferings, and the fear of countless ills to come. The dream of a world in bondage has past away—the hope of the conqueror is cut off—the old man shall go down to the grave in peace ; for days of blessings are in store for his children. From the motionless and silent gloom, which, but yesterday, shrouded the world, has shone out a cheering, quickening light—sounds of thankfulness and joy fill the earth, and over the poverty and desolation which covered it, nature is again pouring out her plenty, and spreading wide her beauties.

May *we* have a heart to share in the general joy ! May the past sufferings of the world be a wholesome lesson to us ! May the schemes of the enthusiastic and the artful be laid aside ! May

we return to the good way in which we once walked, and be blessed, as we once were blessed! Then shall our day be long and glorious; and when it shall have closed about us; the stranger shall visit our land—shall read our departed greatness in our ruins—shall look with veneration upon the broken fabrics of our power—the monuments of the statesmen, the heroes and bards that adorned and protected us.



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